

Decolonising Genesis 1

A sermon by Samara Pitt with help from Uncle Dennis Fisher and Suzanne Peart based on the insights into Genesis 1:1 - 2:4a provided by Aunty Anne Pattel-Gray and her collaborators in De-colonising the biblical narrative volume 1.

4 June, 2023

[Poem to be read by Suzanne and Uncle Den]

*I am Land.
I waited silently in the womb
the waters of the primal Deep
while the Creator Spirit
hovered overhead.*

*Then one day the waters burst
and I appeared above the waters,
alive and excited
as the Spirit gave me a name,
'Land'!*

*I was then animated by the Spirit
and I gave birth to
all kinds of living plants,
animals, birds and insects.*

*The waters around me
also gave birth
to fish, corals, crabs
and even whales.*

*In the Sky above me,
the Spirit inserted bright lights
for Life to flourish
within me.*

*I am Land.
I not only gave birth
to all kinds of Land beings,
I was also invited by the Creator Spirit
to be a partner and create human Land beings.*

*What an event!
Human Land beings were born
in our image,
Spirit and Land united
in living creatures called human beings.*

*Yes, I am Land,
filled with the Spirit
and very much alive
with all forms of Life.*

One of the possibilities of the contemplative tradition, and contemplative practices, is that we can learn how to listen. We can listen, and we don't need to react straight away. We can listen even as big emotions are rising within us, as thoughts and opinions and reactions are swirling and moving and raging and whispering. We can notice those things, and keep listening.

Later this year we are having a referendum on a First Nations Voice to parliament. It will be yet another betrayal of Indigenous peoples if there is a Voice but we don't know how to listen to it. Decolonising is the work of unravelling and dismantling the destructive impact of colonisation on our ways of living and thinking. In decolonising work, we need to bring all of our contemplative attention. That is the invitation this evening, as we hear about some decolonising work that is being done on the first chapter of Genesis.

This creation story from Genesis is one of the big formative stories for Christians. Many of us have heard it a lot. It tells us something about the beginning, about what God had in mind when the world began and all things were created. If we take it to heart, our understandings about this story affect our attitudes and behaviours towards land, God, creatures and plants, light and dark, and people. These are foundational beliefs and they have big implications for how we act now in this time and place.

Aunty Anne Pattel-Gray is a descendent of the Bidjara/Kari Kari people of Queensland, a First Nations biblical scholar and Head of the School of Indigenous Studies at the University of Divinity, amongst other things. In recent times she has been working with First Nations people and non-Indigenous folk on de-colonising the biblical narrative and has begun publishing a series of theology books under that title.

The poem we just heard and the insights I am sharing here tonight are largely taken from the first volume in the series. They are the fruit of people working together, looking through a de-colonised lens and uncovering a theology that is born from the land, and is embedded in the land. I'm keen to draw your attention to it because I find it very good news. I encourage you to read the book for yourselves to gain a fuller understanding and I will do my best to represent their ideas accurately here.

So, how have Aunty Anne, the Rainbow Spirit Elders and their collaborators approached this decolonising work?

Firstly, they point out that the bible has been used as a tool of colonisation. It has been used to justify all sorts of atrocities including dispossessing people from the land, abuse and pollution of the land and its plants and animals, and demonising First Nations cultures and their spiritual insights and practices, just to name a few. If the bible is to have any meaning for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as a revelation of God, it is important to look at how it has also been subject to the agendas and prejudices of colonisers through the ages.

Colonisation can only take place if those involved believe certain things are ok. For example, it's ok to invade and take over land if the people of that land are not using it in a way you think is worthwhile. It's ok to extract wealth from colonised land and not share it equally, or remove it overseas. It's ok to impose one's own language, culture and religion on other people and treat them as inferior. When I talk about a colonising mindset, I am talking about these kind of beliefs, which colour how we interpret the world.

Decolonising the biblical narrative involves firstly looking at how the stories have been translated, and whether the translator has been coming from a colonising mindset.

Secondly, decolonising the biblical narrative involves looking at whether the people who wrote down the stories in our bibles were coming from a colonising mindset themselves. The Israelite people in biblical times were both colonisers and colonised. We can read about how the Promised Land was inhabited by Canaanites before the Israelite people took it over on the understanding that God had promised it to them - in our current understanding, we would call this colonisation. And Genesis was written by Israelites who were themselves invaded by Babylon and dispossessed.

Thirdly, Auntie Anne and her collaborators identify hints of what they call an Ancestral Narrative in the bible text. She defines an Ancestral Narrative as a story that existed before the influence of later colonisers and which has survived in some parts of the stories passed down to us today. In this first part of Genesis, we will see how these decolonising approaches change our familiar reading of the creation story.

In the reading we heard tonight, God began to transform the Sky and the Land. Usually, in verse 1 the Hebrew word *bara'* is translated as 'create' - God began to create the heavens and the earth. The impression we get is that there was nothing, and then God created something out of nothing. Now, if you are a First Nations listener, what might you be reminded of when the story says that in the beginning, there was a place with nothing and nobody in it? Who else came to a place and declared it empty and uninhabited? The myth of *terra nullius* - the empty land - was used to justify colonisation of these lands whose people sustain the oldest continuing culture in the world.

So instead of translating the word *bara'* as 'create', we look to verse 1, which tells us that the land was a 'formless mass'. In light of this, Auntie Anne and her collaborators follow the lead of the Rainbow Spirit Elders who preferred to speak of how the Wind of God hovered over the formless mass and *transformed* it. The land which was then revealed came alive with the abundance of life that the story goes on to describe.

Before we go on however, let's return to our traditional readings which refer to God creating the heavens and the earth.

What image comes to mind when you hear the word 'heavens'? Does this conjure up clouds, angels, lots of white and light, harps, up there somewhere with all the celestial beings? And yet the story is really describing a canopy that separates water below - the seas - from the water above - the rain. Today we call this canopy the sky. It's an everyday word, not a special, super spiritual word. Some of us have a lot of cultural baggage that puts God up there somewhere a long way away in a place that doesn't look like anything we can imagine. How do we relate to this God? How do we imagine this God relates to us?

What about the word 'earth'? How many of us think of that famous photograph of a blue ball hovering in space, Planet Earth, taken in 1972 from the Apollo 17 spacecraft? But this image and understanding is very recent. The writers of the Genesis story were not thinking of a planet. They were thinking something much more like what we think of when we hear the word 'land'.

It's an interesting contrast isn't it? in the beginning, God created a planet and a fabulous but distant celestial realm out of nothingness. Or, in the beginning, God transformed a formless mass waiting in the Deep into the land and the sky.

The emphasis Auntie Anne and her collaborators draw out from this Genesis story is that the Land is the centre of God's attention. The Land is waiting to be born from the Deep. When the waters are drawn back, the Land appears as a divine revelation. The function of the sun and moon are to provide signs and seasons for the Land. The lights in the sky are to give light to the Land. For people who are tuned in to the Land as both alive and life-giving, they hear in this Genesis story the close and cooperative relationship that God is establishing with the Land.

While Auntie Anne's scholars recognise the significance of sun, moon and stars for signs and seasons, they do not recognise seven days of creation. The seven days comes from a very specific calendar understanding that is not universal. For this reason, Auntie Anne and her collaborators have had no qualms about just leaving it out of their translation. When I think of all the angst about the literal or metaphorical seven days of creation, I find her approach here very refreshing!

In verse 24, God says, 'Let the Land bring forth life.' In these words, Auntie Anne and her collaborators hear that the Land is not passive. The Land is Mother Earth, or better, Mother Land or even Co-creator Land. It echoes Indigenous peoples' experience of Land as the source of 'shelter, food, water, medicine, spiritual significance, identity, belonging, inclusion, culture and law.' These echoes are part of what identifies this story as an Ancestral Narrative.

Now we turn to verses 26-28, which detail the first biblical story about the creation of people. Auntie Anne and her collaborators single out these verses as the first place where there is an obvious and jarring addition to the Ancestral Narrative of the Land coming to life. It sounds quite different from the story that surrounds it. Let's listen to a traditional translation, followed by a decolonised reading.

+++ [This section read by Suzanne and Uncle Den]

Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness, and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the sky, over domestic animals, over the Land and over everything that creeps on the Land'.

Then the Wind, the Creator Spirit, said to the Land, 'You have brought forth many Land beings. Let us now together make human beings in our image, male and female, and let their nature reflect both Land and Spirit; and let them be at peace with their kindred Land beings and let them be custodians of the Land.'

So, God formed human beings in his image, in the image of God he formed them, male and female he formed them.

And it happened.

Then God blessed them and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the Land and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the Sea and over the birds of the Sky and over every living creature that creeps on the Land'.

Then the Wind blessed human Land beings and said, 'It is very good'.

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Firstly, God decides to make humankind 'in our image.' Many movements for justice and equality have found support for their cause in this concept that all are made in the image of God. However, Auntie Anne and her collaborators point out that this part of the creation story breaks with the pattern. So far, everything that is made comes from the life-giving force of the Land. In contrast to that pattern, suddenly we hear a story of people coming into being from the mind of a group of celestial beings. Then those people are instructed from on high to rule or have dominion over the Land and everything in it, and to subdue it. The words used in this biblical text refer to how kings and colonial taskmasters rule, and the verb 'kadash' which is often translated as 'subdue' can also be translated as 'rape'. So in this version of the creation story, people are made in the image of a tough Colonial Landlord who exerts violent control over his subjects.

This is deeply problematic for First Nations people who see Land and its creatures as kin, not property to be exploited, and who have experienced the brutality of colonists who have used these verses to justify colonisation and destructive control over Land and people. This is not a God that First Nations people can easily relate to.

The alternative de-colonised reading of Genesis 1:26-28 is not just something made up that sounds nicer than the original. It is an effort to retrieve the 'image of God' that is consistent with the rest of the story in Genesis 1, an image that looks a lot more like people made in the image of the Land by the Creator Spirit, the Wind of God. It is an image that aligns more closely with the story of the creation of people in Genesis 2. In Genesis 2, people are identified as 'ground beings' who serve and preserve the Land as custodians. This is a very different story from the 'dominate and subdue' story of Genesis 1. Auntie Anne's scholars call the Genesis 2 story an Ancestral Narrative, one not contaminated by a colonising mindset.

What difference might it have made if the Christians of Britain and Europe had been given an identity as human beings whose fundamental nature reflected both Land and Spirit, who were at

peace with their kindred Land beings and whose responsibility it was to be custodians of the Land? What difference might it make for us here now, to see all of us people as ground beings, born of Land and the Wind of God, with plants and animals as our kin, and with responsibility to serve and preserve them all?

Let us finish with the poem we heard at the start, inspired by a decolonised reading of Genesis 1. Let us listen deeply with our ears and with our hearts. Let us listen with gratitude for our First Nations sisters and brothers who continue to open our eyes to the Creator Spirit alive in this land.

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hovered overhead.*

*Then one day the waters burst
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